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More residents means more money **With federal funding at stake, groups push for all to take part in census**

BY MITCHELL KLINE • THE TENNESSEAN • NOVEMBER 22, 2009

At a time when sales tax collections and money derived from new construction are down, Williamson County officials say it's a good time to find out how many people live here.

Throughout the county there are groups already encouraging people to participate in the upcoming 2010 U.S. Census, which doesn't officially get started until April. They're talking to civic groups, making announcements at town meetings and asking documented and undocumented residents to complete questionnaires that the U.S. Census Bureau will be sending out. The reason for this peer pressure is simple: It could bring the county more money.

"I think until the economy tightened up, we took these things for granted," said Williamson County Community Development Director Joe Horne. "Now it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to not do what we can to find people."

The county, as a whole, gets about \$1,249 in federal and state dollars for every person counted, according to Horne. Those dollars are shared with cities.

A recent study conducted by Experian/Applied Geographic Solutions found that the county's population has grown to nearly 180,000. Williamson County's take of federal and state-shared revenue could grow by more than \$61 million over what was collected in 2000, based on population projections. That's a lot of money to help pay for road projects, schools and emergency services.

An accurate count is especially important for small towns, such as Thompson's Station, which have small budgets and only a handful of businesses from which to collect sales tax. Thompson's Station has about 1,720 residents and one major retailer: Kroger. Town Administrator Greg Langeliers said each person represents about \$150 for Thompson's Station, or a total of \$258,000.

"It's hugely important for us because it relates directly to revenue," Langeliers said. "We actually just completed a special census and made sure we tracked down all our housing records. We missed a couple people who were philosophically opposed to being counted. Other than them, we left no stone unturned."

By that latest count, the town's population grew by 260 people since 2007, which could be worth an extra \$40,000 in shared revenue.

Thompson's Station has the lowest property tax rate of any municipality in Williamson County (10 cents per \$100 of assessed value) and Langeliers said he's hoping it stays that way. The town is projected to collect about \$750,000 in revenue this year. Even a few thousand dollars could help keep the tax rate where it is.

Participation is challenge

But getting everyone in the county to participate in the census is a challenge. It's estimated that 74 percent of the people living here in 2000 participated in the census count, according to Horne. Brentwood had the highest participation rate, 78 percent, while Spring Hill had the lowest, 66 percent. The state response rate was 65 percent.

Horne said he and other officials haven't set a specific participation goal.

"We're trying to get the word out through schools, civic groups and local governments that the census is coming," Horne said. "It's terribly important but not very sexy. We've been through enough of these to know not everyone wants to participate."

Cecilia Melo-Romie, a Franklin resident, is one of 25 people serving on the county's Complete Count Committee. These folks have made a pledge to promote the census and encourage others to fill out and return the questionnaires they'll receive. Melo-Romie said she's working with the Latino population, including some undocumented residents who are understandably apprehensive about participating in the count.

"We tell them this has nothing to do with immigration," Melo-Romie said. "We have to emphasize it's for all people to be counted, documented or undocumented. We have to educate that population. There's no reason for them to be uncomfortable or worry about immigration. If they have children that go to school here, then it's the schools that suffer if they don't get counted because they will not receive the appropriate federal funding."

There are 10 questions on the census questionnaire and none of them ask about immigration status, according to Jewel Carter Warnock, a spokeswoman for the Census Bureau.

"There's nothing there to ask or even indicate what your legal status is, and the form is completely confidential," Warnock said.

Census data isn't just used to determine how much money local governments get. Population counts are used to determine political representation in many levels of government. It's also something companies look at when deciding where to expand or relocate.

Experian/Applied Geographic Solutions recently sampled a cross section of county residents to find that household income levels have grown and more minorities have moved in.

There are more than 175,995 people living in Williamson County today. That's a 28 percent increase over the population in 2000. It's projected that the county's population will exceed 200,000 residents by 2014.

"Growth projections are what particularly stand out," said Matt Largen, director of county's Office of Economic Development. "Companies look for a vibrant community that has grown in the past and is projected to grow in the future. That shows that their labor pool could continue to grow."

Accurate numbers help cities plan for future government services such as hiring more police officers, fire fighters and public works employees.

"They also help in the planning for hospitals, nursing homes and services for children, the elderly and people with disabilities," said Franklin spokeswoman Monique McCullough.